

# Ernst Rolf

## Rustic Comedian and Cabaret Charmer

He was a big and powerful figure on stage. He wore a peaked cap, checkered cravat, floral vest, black blazer and gray slacks. On his feet were clogs, in one hand a bundle. His straight nose in the air, he made his entrance with his left thumb stuck under his vest and walking pigeon-toed. Later in the program he stood and walked more normally.

In my book about Ernst Rolf this is how I described the 17-year-old entertainer, who in 1908 traveled the length and breadth of the land. After a few years his appearance had changed. He wore a dressy folk costume from Dalarna and looked stylish and grand, his features no longer covered with heavy makeup. Later still, he exchanged his folk costume for top hat and tails. By the time he arrived at Berns Salon in 1914, the young rustic comedian had become a polished performer.

Then he became the revue king . . .

In large part, that was the story of Ernst Rolf's artistic development. Those who speak of him with so much enthusiasm today remember him, of course, as the revue king and cabaret charmer. Even so, he was at his most interesting in his first incarnation, which he never completely abandoned even during his glory days. Were not his railroad workers and sailors of the 1920s but a slight change from his beginnings as a rustic comedian with the same anchoring in the hearts of the people?

If we in Sweden can possibly speak of a tradition in the entertainment industry, it is rustic humor. Rustic comedians we can trace back to medieval minstrels and street performers. The genre was refined in the late 19th century as a consequence of national romanticism. Artur Hazelius and Skansen, provincial associations in the universities, the literature of national romanticism, and the eagerness to record old customs were the order of the day. Jödde i Göljaryd, the father of rustic humor, was followed by Lars Bondeson and numerous others on the vaudeville stage.

Early in his career Ernst Rolf was very much in the same mold when he sang about military recruits and rural matters, and when his handwritten songbooks adhered to the genre. Though it was not long before he discovered the usefulness of music hall numbers. In later years when the revue king Ernst Rolf couldn't unwind after a performance, he would gather people around him and happily sing song after song — but not the streamlined melodies and texts for which he was famous. No, in the late night hours he returned to the rustic songs of his youth. He was

always glad when his composers and lyricists would write songs in the simple style he knew so well from childhood. Songs about sailors and railroad workers fit in quite well.

On this disc one hears Rolf the rustic comedian, cabaret charmer, sailor and railroad worker and finally even the revue king in the transition between acoustic and electric recordings.

Ernst Rolf is one of Sweden's greatest recording artists, singing on 728 titles between 1910 and 1932. When Ernst Rolf got his first recording contract at age 19 — a facsimile of which appears on this album's back cover — he characteristically chose to sing a song of rustic humor. Although strictly speaking, he had no other repertoire then. He sang **Mutters gitarr**, which he as a fifteen-year-old had possibly heard sung by Lars Bondeson, who had discovered the song. His first attempt at song writing provided a cheerful text for **Finska valsen**, which he called **Fleckeras vals**. He came from Dalarna but there was not much of a regional accent in his voice. The well-spoken young man maintained rather a kind of generalized dialect. Early in his career he made numerous recordings of rustic humor. He himself wrote the lyrics to **I alla fulla fall**, which had music by his accompanist Adolf Englund, who was also known as "The Boston King". (The Boston was a type of waltz.) In a similar style was **Kostervalsen**, one of the 1910s' greatest hits, written by Göran Svenning and David Hellström of Strömstad. Every now and then he would dress up as a lowly military recruit and sing about life in the army to the melody of the Swedish Army's "taps" or to the livelier beat of **Beväringsvals från Backamo** — also known as **Tjo uppå Backamo**.

In the autumn of 1910 Ernst Rolf met an unusual songwriter in Trondheim, Norway. Alv Schievloe had a folklike quality to his lyrics. His songs were often in the form of an anecdote. Ernst Rolf translated one of them into Swedish and called it **Ett bra medel mot kalla fötter**. Rolf set up the situation with a brief introduction, and one can hear how the always natural-sounding singer became stiff and unnatural when speaking. Ernst Rolf was no actor. He also spoke a few words at the start of **I Sjöbloms eka**, written by Ture Nerman, who delivered many good texts to Rolf, especially during the period 1917-1918 when Rolf performed at the Phoenix Cabaret. The inspiration for **I Sjöbloms eka** was a painting by Anders Zorn that provoked a debate on morality when it was exhibited. Nerman gave his version of how the painting came about.

Cabaret singer Ernst Rolf had one of his very first big hits with **Barndomshemmet**, whose peculiar American melody was not only the

state song of Indiana but with Karl-Ewert's text and Rolf's performance became the most Swedish of all things Swedish. Rolf first sang **Barndomshemmet** at Berns Salon in 1914, and the song followed him the rest of his life.

When the Phoenix Cabaret opened in the autumn of 1917, it was a meeting place for the people of Stockholm, who wanted to amuse themselves and forget about the shadow of war. The women in the audience were entertained by Rolf's glamorous opening numbers, the most famous of which was **Mitt svärmeri**, a French melody that he had already tried out in Copenhagen and was designed to stir up the audience.

As an interpreter of sailor songs Ernst Rolf reached his peak after meeting Einar Fagstad. The little Norwegian, who peered so comically over rimless glasses while standing behind the mighty Rolf, made them a study in contrasts that owed more to luck than calculation. Their collaboration began with what in my opinion is the best sailor song ever written — apart from the creations of Evert Taube — that is to say, **Från Frisco till Cap**. Cartoonist Martin Nilsson was the lyricist and Rolf himself the composer. The song has all of the trusting sailor's vulnerability, the girl who betrays him and the consolation he seeks in open arms at ports around the world. Rolf searched eagerly for sea shanties to record and sometimes took on songs that were otherwise not in his repertoire. Such was the case with **Skepp som mötas** — Fred Winter and Waldemar Dahlquist's song about Axel Öman.

When the rustic comedian Rolf toured Norway and northern Sweden in the 1910s, he had encountered railroad workers. He knew what they looked like and how they behaved, these hearty men so full of bravado. In 1925 at the Circus Revue, he made his first appearance as a railroad worker in a large vest and floppy hat with a mustache like Daniel Fallström. Gösta Stevens was the main one to supply him with railroading songs. Rolf liked to divide his collaborators into different categories but was never happier than when someone went outside his usual sphere. The song **Ett och två och tre och fyra** rang out with the hammer's blows in Rolf's rhythmic rendition, which he gave at the Circus Revue in 1926.

And this then was the entertainer Ernst Rolf, who began with small-scale revues in 1920 and was in full bloom by 1924. At the Circus Revue in 1926 he made an entrance from the salon and asked the audience **Hur står det till?** Celebrities and unknowns were asked the question, and night after night new stanzas were written by Berco and later on by Gösta Stevens. For three years Rolf sang his **Hur står det till?** in

Stockholm, provincial Sweden, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Oslo. This is yet another example of a number that energized the audience. The consummate revue artist was at his most charming with a song like **Tacka vet jag det som var en gang**, which he performed at Stockholm's Circus in 1926.

And, finally, go ahead and listen to Ernst Rolf — rustic comedian and revue artist, verging on cabaret charmer. It may be a bit scratchy here and there, for these are acoustic recordings. But no scratches can diminish the joyfulness of Rolf's singing.

— Uno Myggan Ericson